

An Interview with
Mary Jane Johnson
March 29, 1979

Interviewed by
Lee Ann Wallace

MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY
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Scope Note: Murrah High School students, with assistance from the
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history interviews with local citizens about local politics and the
Jackson Public Schools integration. The interviews were
conducted during the 1978-1979 school year.

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Part 1

JOHNSON: I'm Mary Jane Johnson and I teach at Bailey Junior High now. I'm a native Jacksonian and I graduated from Central High School in 1961, then attended Hinds and Mississippi College. I received my Master's at Mississippi College in '73. I'm presently teaching seventh grade English. Before coming to Jackson public schools in 1969, I had taught at McGee High School, Copiah High School, and at Wesley Scott High School in Madison County.

WALLACE: Okay, Ms. Johnson, what did you feel about desegregation when it first started happening?

JOHNSON: I think all of us felt that it was something that was really being pushed down our throat. We felt that the child and the parent was not really being considered, that somebody just sat down and drew a line that – well, the court sat down and drew lines and said, "If you live on this side of the street, you're going to one high school, and if you live on the other side, to another." And for some people, particularly when parents had to be at work at very early times of day, it created a real hardship, and this, in itself, I think, made people resent it.

WALLACE: Okay, do you believe that the way that segregation was done that it was the right way?

JOHNSON: I'm not sure that any of us could have suggested an alternate plan, but I think that there could have been some other plan that possibly people, both Black and White, would have been more – which would have been more freely accepted. Quite often those parents suffering the hardships were the black parents, and it was very difficult for them to have to take their children all the way across town, just as it was difficult for white parents to have to have their children bussed to the other side of town, and consequently, I think it left a rather bad taste in everyone's mouth to begin with.

WALLACE: Okay, did you take an active role in – in desegregation at this time?

JOHNSON: Not really. Most of us just tried to take the situation and make the best of it. As it so happened, the year before, I had been the only white teacher in a predominantly – or in an all-black school. It's now a desegregated school. But, this school up in Madison County was at that time a completely black school, and so I was familiar with some of the problems and so forth that youngsters lived with, such as great distances from school, parents who had to go to work before school began and consequently had to leave children at school, and things of this sort. Some of the real problems that resulted from the desegregation, we had already been faced with when I had worked in

Madison County.

WALLACE: Okay, well, what was your opinion about the violence and demonstrations that were so much a part of it at that time?

JOHNSON: I think possibly that so many of those things might have been avoided. We here at Bailey were very fortunate. There were few incidents, but they were rather far between, and I think it was because most of our students accepted each other, not as Black or White, but as an individual. And this was the thing that we as teachers tried to encourage them to do. We tried to tell them that the Lord had made them the way they were and he had a reason and purpose for doing it. And none of us could really help it. We simply had to make the best of it by doing unto others the way we would like them to do unto us.

WALLACE: Okay, is it any better now than what it was then?

JOHNSON: I think it's a great deal better, and again, it's that business of accepting your fellow man as a fellow man, not as a color.

WALLACE: Okay, thank you very much.

Part 2

JOHNSON: I'm Mary Jane Johnson, and I teach at Bailey Junior High School. I graduated from Central High School and attended Hinds Junior College and Mississippi College.

WALLACE: Okay, Ms. Johnson, please tell me how you first found out about desegregation.

JOHNSON: Of course, we were all familiar with it from newspaper accounts and from news reports, from both radio and TV, but our first personal experience came from it when the Freedom of Choice plan was refused by the court system and we were told by those courts the type of systems that would be used.

WALLACE: Okay, what was your response?

JOHNSON: I believe at first, the response of most of us was simply to do the best job we had – we could do, and had been doing, although there were a great many personal problems that we had to face and that teachers were transferred, just as the students were facing those same ones. Kids who had – had members of their family attending a school for generations now suddenly found themselves assigned to a school across town. Teachers who had taught in a particular school for years were suddenly assigned to a

school across town.

WALLACE: Okay, what did the other teachers think about it? What did they say about it?

JOHNSON: This was the general opinion. I think all people, as a rule, hate to be ordered to do anything. Human beings tend to respond to a request more favorably than they respond to an order, and we found this to be true with our children also. In addition, there were the problems mentioned in the earlier interview. Parents were now faced with problems of getting children to schools that were miles away, whereas in the past, they had been able to have the children walk to school. And so it created some difficulties for all persons involved – students, parents, and teachers.

WALLACE: Okay, did you think that it could have been done in a simpler way and if so, how?

JOHNSON: I'm not sure there would be a simpler way. I think possibly that attitudes and feelings and emotions of all parties involved could have been more favorable had it not been a situation where persons felt ordered to do it.

WALLACE: Okay, do you feel that the – that it has hurt the quality of education?

JOHNSON: I think changes have taken place. There's a very definite trend toward individualization. Quality is such an intangible that it would be difficult to answer the question because of that word alone. According to some standards, yes, but according to other standards, no.

WALLACE: Okay, what kind of affect did it have on – have on the kids and the parents?

JOHNSON: I think the same ones that had been mentioned earlier. They hated leaving schools that members of the family had attended for years. Parents faced problems in getting children to school on time. There was a certain amount of unfavorable feeling toward being told that you had to do a particular thing.

WALLACE: Okay, how were the teachers shifted around?

JOHNSON: The teachers were shifted by means of a lottery, which in itself created some problems. Numbers or names were put into a pot and drawn out and, of course, this made no type of allowance for seniority or for the fact that there were factors involved, which perhaps made impossible for a teacher to teach at any – but any certain school. For instance, we had a first-year teacher at that – here at that year, or that year, and, because her husband was in school, she was able only to teach here because there was only one car in the family. Fortunately, her name was not drawn and so she did not have to face

the problem. But, had her name or number been drawn, it would have definitely been a problem.

WALLACE: Okay, were there many fights, riots, or anything like that?

JOHNSON: It's really difficult to think back that many years, to that first year. I would estimate that there were no more than we usually have today.

WALLACE: Okay, do you think that parents and students should've – should have had the right to pick their own schools to go to?

JOHNSON: I believe this was the common feeling among parents and students. It was a feeling expressed to us on more than one occasion.

WALLACE: Okay, all-in-all, was desegregation a failure or was it a success?

JOHNSON: Again, individual opinions must enter into this. According to some, it is successful. According to others, it is not.

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